

Delegation

A Skill You Didn't Learn in School

There are at least two major considerations when deciding when to delegate. First, in the interest of your firm and your internal or external client, you must decide who can do the work effectively. Second, ask yourself if this is an appropriate opportunity to provide a junior colleague with a learning experience.

Who can do the work effectively? Presumably *you* can or you would refer the work to a colleague, rather than keep it yourself or delegate it. Is there someone who can do it equally well - or well enough to meet the needs of the client - at a lower cost to the client, leaving you available to do more profitable work or work that others can't? If so, the work is suitable for delegation with any necessary oversight.

Does this work provide an appropriate teaching opportunity? Would you and your firm benefit from having another person learn the skills this project requires? Would a colleague, presumably a junior colleague, benefit from learning how to do the work this project entails? If so, this project is suitable for delegation with appropriate supervision.

When you've concluded that a project is suitable for delegation, these steps will help you delegate well:

1. Understand that delegating to a junior colleague or a colleague you haven't worked with before will likely require more time than doing the work yourself. Recognize that you're making an investment in the future - yours, your colleague's and your company's.
2. Match the work to the appropriate colleague based on skills, interests and stage of development, rather than handing it off to the first junior colleague who rounds the corner (You wouldn't do that, would you?). Take the time to know the colleagues you work with - or plan to work with - so you can assign work that enhances their career growth while meeting the needs of your organization and clients.
3. Provide an overview of the project and how your colleague's work fits into the larger picture of your matter. This will help your colleague meet the needs of the immediate project and learn how to take responsibility for larger portions of future matters.
4. When first working with a junior colleague, provide suggestions or an outline about how to get started. As your colleague becomes more experienced, give fewer initial suggestions, instead asking him or her to offer ideas and outline a plan to proceed. If you foresee a problem, rather than immediately point it out, ask "what if" questions that will help your colleague recognize the potential problem.
5. Provide the necessary resources and authority to complete the work.
6. Agree on a communication plan and timetable. Tell your colleague when and how you want an update, first draft and/or finished project. Advise your colleague to come to you at any time with questions or problems. Be very clear about your expectations and build in time for re-work.
7. Review the work with your colleague. Provide feedback and instruct your colleague to make necessary corrections or improvements. If you must make corrections yourself, review and explain your corrections. DO NOT make changes without explaining them to your colleague. The experience will be disheartening and you will miss a significant opportunity to help your colleague gain knowledge and confidence.
8. Provide final feedback, including both positive and constructive, about your colleague's performance as well as product. Did your colleague provide timely communications? Did he or she ask intelligent questions, make well-reasoned decisions? Was your colleague responsive to suggestions or corrections? DO NOT overlook substantive performance or product problems. DO begin and end your feedback with positive comments and, where possible, outweigh critical feedback with positive feedback by a ratio of four or five to one.
9. Inform your colleague about the outcome of the matter and his or her role in the outcome.
10. Accept responsibility for failed projects and use them as teaching moments.

11. Give ample recognition for successful work.

12. Say “Thank you.”

Finally, be patient with yourself and others as you learn to delegate and/or as you enter into new delegating relationships. Masterful delegation will improve efficiency, productivity and job satisfaction, benefiting you, your colleagues and your clients.